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ABSTRACT

Black English has existed for a considerable length of time in the North as well as in the South. West African slaves who came to New York in 1625 found a contact language useful and mandatory in order to function in the slave community. The earliest slaves in the New York area may have used Pidgin English, Pidgin Portuguese, or Pidgin French along with their own dialects for a language of wider communication. There are many reasons why Pidgin English would have been the most useful of these closely related languages. Dutch Creoles were very prominent in this early period, and their patois bears a strong resemblance to Pidgin English. Except for a few writers, no one had looked at the language of Black people in Northern cities until the 1960's. It is hoped that a sensible attitude toward Black English, a language with a long and honorable historical background, will be incorporated into the resultant efforts. (CK)

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Section 5: The Historical Perspective

BLACK ENGLISH IN NEW YORK

J. L. Dillard

For a long time, it has been fashionable to refer all the problems of Black-white maladjustment to the South—to assert that the Northern versions of those problems are the result of migration, especially during World War II and immediately thereafter. While it is undoubtedly true that ghetto problems in Northern cities were intensified—and, perhaps more importantly, came to national attention—during that period, it is not strictly true, historically, that the same problems had not existed for a long time in cities like New York. In the area of language, Black English (Negro Non-Standard English, or "Negro dialect"), although perhaps represented by less divergent (more decreolized) varieties in the Northern cities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, proves to have been there all along.

Segregation and prejudice, although over-simple as explanations of the origin of a language variety, are of great importance in explaining the maintenance of that variety alongside Standard English in the same geographic areas. The patterns of these social problems in New York prove to have been more like those of the South than has been generally recognized. In colonial New York, slavery was as widespread and as oppressive as it was further to the South. The Black Code of New York City was second only to that of South Carolina, and not less oppressive by much (Leonard, 1910:210; Szasz, 1967:217). Racial separation of this sort promoted the maintenance of different language varieties.[1]

There was prominent in the West African slave trade a Pidgin English (Cassidy, 1962) which was creolized on this continent, in the West Indies, and elsewhere (Bailey, 1965; Stewart, 1967, 1968; Dillard in press). At base, this English Pidgin consisted of English vocabulary within the structure of Portuguese Trade Pidgin and the Mediterranean Lingua Franca, Sabir, with of course a large number of Africanisms, especially in phonology. Creolized, this variety of English gradually changed to be more like those varieties which came more directly from the British Isles (Bloomfield, 1933: 474; Hershovits, 1941). The results of this process are well known insofar as the still largely creolized variety found in the vicinity of the Georgia South Carolina Sea Islands is concerned (Turner, 1949); but it has only recently been shown that the earlier history of the English dialects of North American Negroes in general was almost exactly like that of the residents of the Sea Islands and of the West Indies (Bailey, 1965; Stewart, 1967, 1968; Dillard, in press).

[1] On survival of African cultural practices, see (among many sources) Gabriel Furman, **Antiquities of Long Island**, New York, 1875, pp. 267-269.

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Those West African slaves who came to New York in 1625 had such interesting names as "Paul d'Angola, Simon Congo, Anthony Portuguese, John Francisco, and seven others" (O'Callaghan, 1867:xii). They and those slaves who soon followed them faced the problem of using, in interaction with their Dutch masters and with the fellow slaves who came from widely varying African language groups, a *lingua franca*. Some of the solutions, in the early days, were provided by the use of African Languages like Wolof or Mandingo, along with which the slaves brought West African cultural traits like the use of day names (i.e., Cuffee 'male born on Friday'). Pidginized versions of European languages, especially Portuguese, English, and French, came, however, to have a more general—and therefore more useful—function in the slave community. Use of a contact language was all the more mandatory because "a dozen or 15 European languages might have been heard in the streets of the town" (Ulmann, 1931:6).

To linguists, particularly those specialized in Creole studies, the notion of a Dutch Creole poses some special problems. The definition of a Creole is 'a Pidgin which has become the native language of a speech community'; but there is no record of a Dutch Pidgin. There are abundant records of pidgin varieties of English, French, and Portuguese—in West Africa and in the Americas—and there are borrowings from those pidgins in West African languages like Temne and Twi. But there are no such borrowings from Dutch, although there are traces of Dutch cultural practices (Schneider, 1967). It seems inescapable that early linguistic borrowings, especially, were made through the medium of the pidgins, and that there simply was no Pidgin Dutch.

The answer seems to be that the Dutch, along with other Germanic—Danish and English—traders, made use of the Mediterranean Lingua Franca (Sabir) and the Pidgin varieties of Portuguese and English. A small nation, trying to hold its own in the maritime competition, Holland was inclined even then to make up the difference in linguistic virtuosity. Their slaves, the earliest in the New York area, may have used Pidgin English, Pidgin Portuguese, or Pidgin French along with Wolof, Mandingo, or some other West African language, for the purposes of a language of wider communication. But there were many reasons why Pidgin English would have been the most useful of these closely related (Thompson, 1961; Whinnom, 1965) languages. Because of constant contact with their Dutch masters, they naturally took a lot of Dutch vocabulary into that Pidgin.[2] The same process has taken place in the English Creoles of Surinam (Rens, 1953), which are easily mistaken for varieties of Dutch by unwary English-speaking people. This process is known as relexification (Stewart, 1962; Taylor, 1960) and contact languages like the pidgins and creoles are especially prone to that process (Whinnom, 1965). Lingua Franca was especially characterized by such vocabulary substitution (Schuchardt, 1909).

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[2] This process, called **relexification** in Stewart, 1962, led to the development of Pidgin English (and French) on the structural model of the Portuguese Trade Pidgin. There are some overt statements:

> The **English** have in the River **Gambia** much corrupted the **English** language by Words or Literal Translations from the Portuguese or the Mandingoes.
>
> (F. Moore, **Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa**, London, 1738, p. 294)

Relexification of Pidgin English with (e.g.) Dutch vocabulary items would be a continuation of the same process. There is indirect evidence like the following statements:

> Yea the name of English-men were [sic] so famous in the East, that the Hollanders in their first trade thither, varnished their obscuritie with English lustre, and gave themselves out English.
>
> (**Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas His Pilgrimes**, II:288. The statement is dated 1591.)

The Dutch Creole, whatever its origin, of the slaves of Early New Amsterdam/York is an interesting historical topic upon which not even the preliminary spadework has been done.[3] For present purposes, we can go into the matter no more deeply than to say that Dutch Creole existed in the state from sometime after 1625 until at least 1910. A wide-ranging researcher named J. Dyneley Prince (who also did some of the only work on American Indian language-based pidgins in the New York/New Jersey area) recorded some "Negerhollands" from Suffern, N. Y., in 1910. Although, in his day, he could hardly have anticipated the hypothesis that Pidgin English was at the base of the Dutch Creole (first formulated, insofar as I know, by William A. Stewart and myself in 1970), he did note that many of the Black Dutch forms were English-like rather than Dutch (*wän* 'when,' rather than *wäner*), and that there were such (typically Creole, in effect) grammatical features as the use of an unmarked verb in a past-time environment. These strikingly non-Dutch grammatical features are also characteristic of the Dutch Creole texts recorded by Hesseling (1905) and Josselyn de Jong (1924, 1926).[4]

It would be difficult—perhaps even impossible—to recover biographical details about Prince's "Negro Dutch" informant, seventy-five year old William De Freece. But we can look into earlier times and find a famous informant about whom a great deal is known—Sojourner Truth, formerly a slave girl named Isabella who reportedly spoke only "Dutch patois" until she was twenty-one. In an interview with Sojourner Truth (*Atlantic Monthly*, 1863), Harriet Beecher Stowe quoted the former slave girl in a variety of English which is not too far removed from that of inner city (and rural) Blacks today:

> I journeys round to camp meetings, an' wherever folks is, an' I sets up my banner, an' then I sings, an' then I preaches to 'em. I tells 'em about the sins of this people. A great many always comes to hear me; an' they're right good to me, too, an' say they want to hear me again.
>
> ("Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl," *Atlantic Monthly*, 11[1863]:478).

Sojourner Truth is represented by many writers as a very fluent and powerful public speaker—another of the many who put to scorn the notion that Black English is a limited language variety—even if she did occasionally have to grope for special vocabulary items like *intellect*. But a totally new language, learned at the linguistically advanced age of twenty-one or more, would be a surprising vehicle for such public performance. True, Sojourner Truth was an unusual woman—one who might have mastered

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[3] There are statements susceptible to reinterpretation in nonlinguistic works like Vanderbilt, 1881:550:

> For a long time [among the Negroes of New York City] in this mingling of two languages, neither was grammatically spoken, bad English and worse Dutch was the result . . .

It is amusing that English Creole in the Guyanas today is often called "bad" English (by Dutchmen) and "bad" Dutch (by Englishmen and Americans).

[4] Virgin Islands "Dutch" Creole appears to have been, in the verbal auxiliary system, at least, closer to the Afro-Portuguese Trade Pidgin which was more or less original in the slave trade than Sranan Tongo, of Surinam. Thus we find not only **le** (from **de**, by regular phonological change) as a durative aspect marker but **lo** (from Portuguese **logo**, see Schuchardt, 1882) as a future marker. There are many other structures which are common to the related Pidgin and Creole languages, like the anticipatory verb in

> **Slaep me ka slaep**
> (Hesseling, 1905:117)

the simple negation with **no**

> **Mi no wil** 'Dat wil ik niet'
> (**Ibid.**; 173)

the use of **kaba** 'already' (from Portuguese Trade Pidgin **caba**), and the use of the preposition **na**.

many language varieties. But it seems quite plausible that she was helped along by the fact that her original Dutch "patois" and her new Black English were rather closely related, that both of them had some historical roots in the maritime Pidgin English which was the source of the English varieties of the slave trade—among other varieties.

Even without the Dutch associations, Pidgin English had come to the New York area very early. Sarah Kemble Knight reported of her trip from Boston to New York (*Journal*, 1705) that she had heard a current story regarding the attempt of a couple of justices to communicate in their clumsy Pidgin English with an Indian who was fluent in it. The Indian—who had been accused of delivering stolen goods to a Black slave—failed to understand the Pidgin English form *grandy*, although that belongs to the earliest Lingua Franca stratum of the background of the language. It seems very likely that the Indians got the Pidgin English originally from their Black fellow slaves (Dillard, in press, Chapter IV); but they must have altered it somewhat, especially in the manner of introducing vocabulary items and loan translations ("calques") from the Indian languages. The Indian calque for *grandy* is the well-known *heap*. Although it is popularly believed that the history of Black English took place below the Mason-Dixon line, there are eighteenth century attestations of its use in Massachusetts (from Cotton Mather, among others), New York, Philadelphia (from Benjamin Franklin), Maryland, and Nova Scotia (Dillard, in preparation).

Within the colony of New York, perhaps the most impressive evidence is that provided by Justice Daniel Horsmanden's *The New York Conspiracy . . . 1741-42*. A witness at the trial of the alleged conspirators of the "Negro Plot," Jack posed some language problems although he spoke "English"

> his dialect was so perfectly negro and unintelligible, it was thought it would be impossible to make anything of him without the help of an interpreter. (1810 edition, p. 127)

There were, however, two young (white) men who had learned the dialect and who acted as interpreters. Jack was an acknowledged leader in the Black community, so it can hardly be that he suffered from a speech impediment. Furthermore, Horsmanden gave enough samples of his speech like

> His master live in tall house Broadway. Ben ride de fat horse. (p. 128)

and enough other references to the speech of contemporary Blacks like

> . . . Backarara . . . 'Negro language, signifies white people' (p. 331)
>
> . . . the house . . . This in the Negroes dialect signifies houses, i.e., the town. (p. 209)

to enable us to recognize the obvious relationship to other contemporary Black English varieties. Whites of the period were familiar with the existence of this variety in New York; but only a few like the two young men, apparently, really mastered it. Jack's not overly long testimony required three days of the court's time.

In the nineteenth century, Black English is widely represented in literary texts set in the New York area. James Fenimore Cooper, whose practices have been severely attacked but just as strongly defended, put a rather greatly decreolized Black English into the mouth of Jaap (the *Santansoe* novels) and of others of his Black characters:

> I'm York nigger born, and nebber see no Africa.
> (*Santansoe*, p. 149)

Even Natty Bumpo included Pidgin English among his many linguistic accomplishments. Mark Twain's brilliant criticism of Cooper's "Literary Offenses" goes aground here: In the world of Pidgin/Creole, many a speaker uses one variety of a language six days a week and quite another variety of the same language "on Sunday." Twain clearly transferred the relative linguistic simplicity of his midwestern youth to the polyglot complexity of the frontier, and in doing so committed almost as great a blunder as did Cooper in describing how several Indians jumped from a "sapling" and managed to miss a passing houseboat, one after the other.

Many other writers of the nineteenth century join Cooper in providing such evidence. Thomas Chandler Halliburton, a Nova Scotian who wrote under the pseudonym of Sam Slick, represented Black characters speaking English Creole or a somewhat decreolized variety all the way from Charleston, South Carolina, to Halifax, Nova Scotia.[5] Halliburton's dialect forms, insofar as white dialects are concerned, figure prominently in historical dictionaries like the *Dictionary of Americanisms*. One wonders what special characteristics of Black English make it not subject to the same kind of documentation, for the dictionaries record none of the usages which Halliburton attributed to Blacks.

Stephen Crane's *The Monster*, one of his Whilomville stories, presented a heroic, dialect-speaking Henry Johnson whose cruel rejection by the white community after he had disfigured himself in rescuing a small boy is held to have influenced Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*. Johnson says things like

> I done tol' yer many's the time not to go a-foolin' an' a-projjeckin' with them flowers. Yer pop don' like it nohow. (p. 9)

Another Black, Alex Williams, also speaks the dialect:

> He mighty quiet ter-night. (p. 66)

These attestations were provided by an author who was a lifelong resident of the New York area.

It has been asserted (Stockton, 1966; Krapp, 1925) that there was a kind of literary conspiracy to misrepresent the English of Black speakers, falsely to represent a kind of "literary pseudo-Gullah" as the language of Blacks throughout the United States (and Nova Scotia). If there was such a conspiracy, it must have been the greatest in the history of literature—including eventually Black writers like Ellison, Charles W. Chestnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, and J. Mason Brewer (see the introduction to *Dog Ghosts and Other Texas Negro Folk Tales*, 1958). Everybody was in on it, including Charles Dickens, who put the following speech into the mouth of a New York City Negro of the 1840's:

> Him kep a seat 'side himself, sa.
> (*Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 164)

It is patently absurd to postulate a literary conspiracy—otherwise unreported, and having no consequences except the linguistic ones—which included Madam Knight, Justice Horsmanden, Halliburton, Dickens (and, incidentally, Charles Lyell), Cooper, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Crane among its hundreds of connivers. (To be fair, we would have to postulate a Dutch branch including Prince and Van Loon.) We seem rather to be

[5] New York was an important source of the ex-slaves who migrated to Nova Scotia in the eighteenth century (Ottley and Weatherby, 1967:39). At least one Black English variety still survives (Dillard, in preparation) in the Halifax area, where geographism sometimes ascribes a "Southern accent" to these long-time Canadian residents!

dealing with relatively accurate attestations—subject to exactly the same limitations as any literary attestations, including those of the older Germanic languages—over a long period of time and in many geographic areas by writers of many backgrounds, skills, and interests. Such uniformity as they represent may actually reflect a real uniformity. And the similarity of the New York attestations to the attestations from other areas may mean that Black English in New York was actually very similar to that of other areas. Variations were more in terms of social status, as in the famous differences between house servants and field hands (Frazier, 1957:13), than in geography.

But what of the notion, dear to many dialectologists, that Black English (conceived of as a "Southern" or "rural" dialect) found its way to New York in the World War II migrations? In its most basic sense, that notion is simply false. Dialects in the North were more greatly decreolized (Stewart, 1968) than those in the South, but they were completely merged with white dialects no more in New York than in Nova Scotia (Dillard, in preparation). Migrant dialects came into contact with Harlem dialects which were hardly more decreolized, especially among the younger children (Stewart, 1965; Dillard, 1967). The consequences of faulty dialect history have been frequent absurdity. Grier and Cobbs, in *Black Rage*, wrote of a subject who had been born and educated in "a large Northern city" that he spoke "the patois of the rural uneducated Negro of seventy-five years ago" (p. 98). Even if we believed such a statement in geographic terms, we could hardly accept the historical notion unless someone had invented an operational Time Machine. It is simply true that psychiatrists, like other non-linguists who have needed language information, have not been able to draw upon accurate information—whether grammatical or historical—about Black English.

Except for a few writers with intellectual curiosity like Prince, no one had looked at the language of Black people in Northern cities until it become fashionable to do so in the fad of social dialectology in the 1960's. Labov et al., 1968, now provides a gigantic corpus which shows just how much the English of Harlem teenagers differs from that of white New Yorkers.[6] (An equivalent corpus from youngsters between six and ten would show much more difference.) There are at last some stirrings of educational responsibility toward the ghetto population. It is to be hoped that a sensible attitude toward Black English, a language with a long and honorable historical background, will be incorporated into the resultant efforts.

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[6] Joan G. Fickett, **Aspects of Morphemics, Syntax, and Semology of an Inner-City Dialect (Merican)**, U. of Buffalo dissertation, 1970 presents material which is in many respects even more relevant, especially in that she points out that, while her Black informants who were born outside Buffalo may differ in phonological items, the grammar of "Merican" (approximately Stewart's **Black English basilect**) does not seem to vary with geographic origin.

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